

## **Peak fandom: Nostalgia, frustration and the shifting orders of fandom in *Twin Peaks: The Return***

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### **Abstract:**

On October 6, 2014, Showtime announced the return of *Twin Peaks* in the form of a miniseries by original creators David Lynch and Mark Frost that would be a continuation of the well-remembered 1990s series. After a few false starts (setting up a series of flows and delays that would come to characterise TP:TR's narrative as well), TP:TR debuted on May 21, 2017 with an eighteen-episode run. While *Peaks* has maintained its fans over the years (including a growing body of academic literature) it has been both derided and praised by television critics and the broader viewing public in equal measure. It was therefore seen as something of a risky investment by Showtime. Coming at a time when television revivals are becoming a fixture on streaming services, this presentation explores how TP:TR addresses its shifting orders of fandom, engages with and frustrates moments of fan service and simultaneously indulges in moments of nostalgia while broadening its scope and reach. As such it offers an analysis of how fan audiences will factor into the future of streaming services and how success is now understood.

**Keywords:** *Twin Peaks*; nostalgia; fandom; audiences; fan service.

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

On October 6, 2014, Showtime announced the return of *Twin Peaks* (hereinafter *Peaks*) in the form of a miniseries by original creators David Lynch and Mark Frost entitled *Twin Peaks: The Return* (hereinafter *Return*). Rather than a reboot, this would be a continuation of the well-remembered 1990s series, actually tying into a plot point in the original series that referenced a 25-year delay, the period of time lead character Dale Cooper (Kyle McLachlan) is trapped in the Black Lodge. After a few false starts (setting up a series of flows

and delays that would come to characterise *Return's* narrative as well) *Return* debuted on May 21, 2017 with an 18-episode run.

While *Peaks* has maintained its fans over the years (including a growing body of academic literature) it has been derided and praised by television critics and the broader viewing public in equal measure. It was therefore seen as something of a risky investment by Showtime. But despite its relatively short run and critical panning at the time, *Peaks* remains perhaps the purest example of what John Caldwell (1995) terms 'televisuality'. Televisuality is that combination of the industrial, technical and authorial that became increasingly complex and more demanding of television audiences during the 1980s. In 1990, *Peaks* confirmed the possibility raised in *Moonlighting* that television could be an art form and it inventively blended the ongoing soap opera subplots introduced in *Hill Street Blues*, with the idea of the story arc, as presented in *Wiseguy*. It moved American Quality Television towards the 'quirky', complex and filmic character-based dramas that are now increasingly prevalent on streaming services (like *Ozark*) and American commercial television (like *Breaking Bad* or *Riverdale*). Ironically these are referred to as 'Peak TV'. As such *Peaks* stands at the apex of televisuality, a summation of what came before and an indication of what was to come next. As *Age* television columnist Marc Spitz writes, *Peaks* 'changed television forever. Its odd tempo, black humour, brutal violence, pastoral beauty and nightmarish imagery inspired an adventurous new kind of TV serial, from *The X-Files* to *The Sopranos* to *Lost*' (Spitz 10-11).

Coming at a time when generational franchises like *Jurassic World*, *Blade Runner* and *Star Wars* populate cinemas and television revivals like *Will & Grace*, *Murphy Brown* and *The Conners* and reboots like *Hawaii Five-O*, *Charmed* and *Magnum PI* are becoming fixtures across networks and streaming services, this paper explores how *Return* addresses its shifting orders of fandom. It focuses on how *Return* engages with and frustrates fan nostalgia (with reference to a typology of how nostalgia is enacted) while simultaneously advancing *Peaks'* narrative preoccupation with domestic violence, incest and trauma. As such it offers an analysis of the uneasy tensions between networks, fans and content creators around nostalgic properties.

## Nostalgia

Perhaps one of the most memorable definitions of nostalgia occurs in the television series *Mad Men*, Season 1 Episode 13 'The Wheel', where ad man Don Draper (John Hamm) pitches to Kodak. As Don says:

Well, technology is a glittering lure, but there is a rare occasion when the public can be engaged on a level beyond flash if they have a sentimental bond with the product ... nostalgia. It's delicate ... but potent. Teddy told me that in Greek 'nostalgia' literally means 'the pain from an old wound.' It's a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone.

Here Don is referring to Kodak's 1960s slide projector the Carousel but he could just as easily be referring to *Peaks* and more particularly the timeless set of the Red Room which remains largely unchanged throughout both iterations.

This device isn't a spaceship ... it's a time machine. It goes backwards ... and forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again.

Don's definition is in many respects accurate. Nostalgia literally comes from the Greek *nomos* 'to return home' and *algia* or *algos* 'a painful condition or ache' – 'a painful yearning to return home'. It was coined by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in his 1688 thesis to describe a condition he observed in a fellow student studying away from home and in Swiss mercenaries who were hired to fight in other countries' wars. Hofer defined it as 'the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one's native land'. Until the 1880s it was classified as a disease, a popular medical diagnosis for a psychiatric disorder that could (if left untreated) result in death (Boym 2002). For example, writing in his journal on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September in 1770, Sir Joseph Banks noted that sailors during the first voyage of Captain Cook 'were now pretty far gone with the longing for home which the Physicians have gone so far as to esteem a disease under the name of Nostalgia' (Eaglehole at 145). Cases were still being diagnosed as late as the American Civil War. But as understandings in anatomy, pathology, biology – and germ theory as a whole – deepened, nostalgia ceased to be regarded as a medical condition and was instead claimed by the poets and philosophers of the Romantic Movement to describe their melancholy and ennui (Boym 2002). It is similarly as malady, that *Return* addresses the nostalgia of its fans.

### **Typology of Nostalgia**

Nostalgia for *Peaks* rests in the powerful semiosis of the original series, as conveyed through word and images. The Red Room. The Log Lady. Laura Palmer's wholesome high school photo, smiling to camera. Rows of Donuts. Dale's tape recorder and sentences that begin with 'Dianne'... Cherry Pie. Black Coffee. The owl symbol. The music. The credits. Laura wrapped in plastic. The owls. Audrey Horne dancing or twisting a cherry stem. BOB. These are the images and words that signify *Peaks* for many fans.

In exploring how *Return* engages with nostalgia and how it addresses, subverts, supports or ignores this semiosis, it becomes necessary to refer to a typology of how nostalgia can be enacted. This is a tool I have been developing through my own work around nostalgia and is contextualised across additional examples of film and television that similarly engage with nostalgia on some level.

#### **i) *Falling Back on What You Know***

One of the great appeals of the *Star Wars* franchise is that it is both timeless and current. This is encapsulated a few seconds into every *Star Wars* film, in that title card 'A long time

ago, in a galaxy far, far away...' Writing for *Time*, Lev Grossman identifies this effect as leaving 'you with a strange nostalgic longing for the future... it looks like science fiction, with robots and lasers and such, but at the same time it's set far in the past and has the dustiness and feel of ancient history (Grossman, 38). Disney's new films go one step further – nostalgia for *Star Wars* nostalgia, deliberately evoking moments, the composition of shots, even camera movements, from the original films (see Golding 2015 for more detail). In this way, the past becomes present in *Star Wars*. Always.

Such nostalgia also permeates *The Force Awakens'* narrative: father/son dynamics, a droid carrying secrets crucial to the universe's survival, a super weapon that destroys planets, deliberate call backs in dialogue and scenes to the original films (a reference to a trash compactor here, a holographic *dejarik* chess set flaring into life there, a desert planet, a snow planet, etc). Scenes are literally littered with the debris of past movies, like discarded toys on a play room floor; Rey lives in an abandoned AT-AT Walker; the Millennium Falcon passes from thief to thief; pirate Maz Kanata keeps Luke Skywalker's lightsaber like a collectible, 'mint in box'.

But what is more interesting is *The Force Awakens'* often critical approach to nostalgia. We are constantly reminded of the cyclical nature of things, the failure of people to change and move forward. The film's villain, Kylo Ren, is as obsessive as any *Star Wars* fan. He speaks to the melted ruin of Darth Vader's mask, throwing tantrums when things don't go his way, fetishising the life (and fashion choices) of the Sith. He is very much a character trapped by his slavish devotion to the past. The First Order, built from the ashes of the Empire, similarly falls back on old ideas and iconography: Stormtroopers with an Apple-style upgrade in look (and, apparently, targeting ability), even more overt Nazi-style rallies and a super weapon that destroys worlds (just like the Death Star and Death Star II) with a similar fatal design flaw. Luke Skywalker is absent because, like his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi, he too has gone into exile to protect the galaxy (here surrounded by water rather than desert). And perhaps, most poignantly, Han and Leia, their marriage having fallen apart, have both returned to what they know best – Han is a smuggler (rather than a war hero) and Leia is a General in the Resistance (rather than a leader in the New Republic). Implicit in each character is the idea that nostalgia can be a dangerous thing, a yearning we cannot ignore, that lures us to recycle and repeat rather than innovate and create.

*The Force Awakens* advances this idea of nostalgia as malady we must resist. Even as audiences pine and yearn for a 'return' to the *Star Wars* of their youth (evident in the continuing breaking of box office records) the film acts as cautionary tale of two warring cultures (be it Sith and Jedi, Empire and Rebellion, First Order and Resistance) who cannot escape the cycle and therefore become destined to fall back on what they know, to repeat rather than reset. The only possibility of hope, of breaking this cycle, rests with new characters like Finn and Rey; the sequel film *The Last Jedi* takes these themes further.

Elements of *Return* offer fandom this version of nostalgia, most significantly through Cooper (which I will return to below) but also through the character of Shelley McCauley Briggs (Madchen Amick). We can see this mode of nostalgia in Shelley's on-again, off-again

relationship with Bobby Briggs (Dana Ashbrook) as well as her ongoing attraction to bad men.

## **ii) Fan Service**

Fan service here is defined as the use of nostalgia to deliberately construct an idealised version of the past as remembered rather than experienced, even if that past is removed from the truth. The entirety of the Duffer Brothers' *Stranger Things* is an example of fan service, a nostalgia piece that is not interested in generating nostalgia for the 80s per se but for the *filmic version* of the 80s that existed alongside it, filtered through the directorial visions of Spielberg, Dante, etcetera. This level of fan service increases in the second season, where part of the narrative is given over to investigating the disappearance of a secondary character, Barbara 'Barb' Holland (Shannon Purser), that was largely prompted by extradiegetic concerns raised by fandom.

In sharp distinction, *Return* regularly frustrates fan service. Lead character, Dale Cooper, is reduced to an amnesiac (borderline) idiot savant named Dougie for most of the series' run, offering only tantalizing glimpses of the Cooper that audiences know. Most of the action is removed from the town of Twin Peaks and spent with characters who are new to the audience. Indeed, the only real example of fan service is arguably the coming together of erstwhile lovers, gas station owner Ed Hurley (Everett McGill) and waitress/entrepreneur Norma Jennings (Peggy Lipton).

## **iii) Holding Pattern, where characters have been unable to move on in the intervening period of time.**

Dennis Villeneuve's 2017 sequel to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049*, provides an interesting example of how nostalgia can be expressed through this idea of the holding pattern in relation to the lead character of Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford). Here, Deckard appears as a man unable or unwilling to move on, hiding out in a post-apocalyptic Vegas, surrounded by holograms of faded Vegas stars, with only a dog for company. Even when Deckard leaves Vegas he continues to be held in the past, taunted by an artificial version of Rachel (Sean Young), the replicant who was his lover whom he saw die. The closest example of this in *Return* would be the character of former teen heartthrob/rebel James Hurley (James Marshall) who is presented as still performing the same sickly sweet teenage love song, decades later.

## **Frustrating Nostalgia**

These examples aside, for the most part *Return* evinces an intention to disrupt rather than indulge Nostalgia. The clearest example of this is the instant classic Episode 8 which actually disrupts the narrative[s] with an artistic/historic digression into the nature of evil featuring none of the recurrent cast. Here too is an indication of *Return's* shifting orders of fandom. Episode 8 is more like a Lynch experimental movie (or installation) rather than an episode of

*Peaks*. As such, *Return* seems to be constructed as appealing more to fans of David Lynch rather than (just) fans of *Peaks* (not that these are necessarily mutually exclusive categories, see Bainbridge 2006). Similarly, just as Episode 8 undercuts the wholesomeness of the 50s, *Return* is a narrative about nostalgia that undercuts the possibility of being able to easily return to the past.

Some of the most recognisable characters in *Peaks*' semiology are rendered almost unrecognisable. The Giant (Carel Struycken) appears mute, in black-and-white and is referred to as the Fireman (suggesting he may be a different character altogether). The Man From Another Place (Michael J. Anderson), also known as the arm, appears as a talking tree with a head, also known as 'the evolution of the arm'. As noted earlier, Dale Cooper is split into two/three different characters, denying him narrative progression as is Audrey Horne (Sherilyn Fenn) who appears late in the narrative in a series of increasingly cryptic scenes. Indeed, she openly taunts our nostalgia for her by performing the same dance she performed as a school girl in *Peaks*.

This ironic sense of play and frustration with fandom has always been part of *Peaks*, particularly in terms of playing with genre. Just as *Peaks* played with the murder mystery genre, *Return* plays with the superhero genre, suggesting resolution may be found in the minor character of security guard Freddie Sykes (Jake Wardle) and his green glove of superhuman strength. Similarly, early episodes of *Return* appear to mock the very notion of 'Peak television' having people sit around watching an eerie Glass box with an elaborate camera set-up.

## **Domestic Violence**

What *Return* does do is return us (pun intended) to *Peaks*' narrative preoccupation with domestic violence. Writing on this previously with my co-author Delaney, I've argued that we can identify *domestic violence* as the central narrative thread of *Peaks* because it links the two discrete aspects of the original series, the Laura Palmer and Wyndham Earle investigations (Bainbridge and Delaney 2012). The Leland/Laura and Wyndham/Caroline relationships are both steeped in domestic violence, with BOB remaining the constant symbol of domestic violence throughout. As if to confirm this we see BOB, Leland and Wyndham Earle together in the metaphysical 'Red Room' in the final episode of *Peaks*.

Once again, for the purposes of this paper, domestic violence will be understood in Kathleen J. Ferraro's terms as 'a code for physical and emotional brutality within intimate relationships, usually heterosexual' (Ferraro, 77). Such brutality is played out in the domestic or family sphere and is governed by silence, with the most successful perpetrators of domestic violence being those who are able to inflict pain in ways that are not easily visible to the naked eye.

## **Understanding the Black Lodge**

One of the keys to understanding *Peaks'* incest narrative is in understanding what the Black Lodge's most famous resident, BOB (also Bob or Killer Bob, BOB being the acronym 'Beware of Bob'), actually represents. Famously, BOB entered the diegesis by 'artistic accident'; Lynch saw the set dresser Frank Silva crouching near the bed in a scene, kept him in frame and used him to provide an ending to the European direct-to-video version of the *Peaks'* pilot (1989) (Rodley, 163-164). Here, an eighteen-minute coda to the pilot revealed BOB was Laura's killer, a drifter who might have also been a personification of the devil. The coda provided the footage for Dale's dream (including the 25-year time jump that informed so much of *Return*) and Lynch has referred to the fact that 'fifty per cent of [*Peaks*] was born because of being forced to do that closed ending' (qtd Hughes, 117). BOB himself didn't appear in the original *Peaks* series until Episode 3. While Silva had passed away before *Return* both the character and Silva's image (through archival footage and CGI) remain a significant presence in the new series, passing from character to character (he travelled with Cooper's doppelganger for 25 years) until he is shattered by Freddy Sykes's green glove in the final episodes.

In the diegesis BOB is described by the one-armed man Mike as his 'familiar', he 'attaches himself to a human and feeds on fear ... pleasures are his children' (*Peaks* Episode 13). BOB is one of the key mythological elements in the series, a denizen of the Black Lodge. Lynch describes him as 'an abstraction with a human form' (qtd Rodley: 178) and this becomes apparent in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (hereinafter *FWM*) where both Laura and Ronnette see BOB as the attacker/rapist rather than Leland. BOB clearly has a physical form. Similarly, Leland sees BOB reflected in the mirror before and after the murder of Maddie. While Rodley suggests BOB stopped the series becoming 'ultimately ... just one of incest' (Rodley, 179), there is no sense that Leland is aware the image is not his own.

Within the diegesis BOB can therefore be understood as a personification of 'the evil that men do' (as Agent Rosenfield claims) but, even more importantly, extra-diegetically BOB is actually *making visible* this idea of domestic violence, quite literally giving a face to the change that comes over someone engaged in this act, the 'dual personality' so many accounts refer to. As Diane Stevenson suggests:

that BOB the demon possesses Leland tells us that anyone could be so possessed, that the incestuous and the murderous do not arise from inside but are constructed from outside. The ambiguity of the fantastic is not an obfuscation here but an expression of a genuine uncertainty about our understanding of family violence. (Stevenson, 75)

BOB therefore becomes a way of externalising this internal tension and part of *Peaks'* ongoing interest in inside and outside, surfaces and depths.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, BOB also problematises *Peaks* as incest narrative. While he makes domestic violence visible he also raises the possibility of disavowal.<sup>3</sup> 'I didn't kill anybody', says Leland towards the end of *Peaks'* original run, and the lawmen seem to agree with him,

what Doane and Hodges' have identified as 'denial and resistance' around domestic violence in action (Doane and Hodges 2001). It is arguable that while *Peaks* is adventurous and daring in its tackling of the subject of incest/domestic violence, it is ultimately conservative in its treatment, transferring responsibility from the father to a supernatural 'other' – BOB.

*Return* expands on this by introducing additional supernatural entities, including a monstrous feminine 'Mother' that seems to have possessed Laura Palmer's mother Sarah Palmer (Grace Zabriskie). These are liminal figures, briefly seen and not explained, however they appear as people we know and trust. As such they further *Peaks'* suggestion that modernity itself is incomplete, it has 'blind spots' and is therefore limited and circumscribed.

Lyotard (1988) terms these blind spots '*differends*', the things that go unrepresented or unheard. BOB, Mother and the other 'weird' figures of the Black Lodge (and White Lodge for that matter), along with the notions of incest and domestic violence they embody and respond to, similarly exist as *differends*. They are concepts that modernity can neither understand nor adequately remedy. More significantly, these figures can all be read as figures of *deconstruction*. They literally overturn narrative progression and explanation just as easily as they overturn the traditional, modern hierarchies of law and government, of reason over passion and rationality over irrationality. In their place they offer the inverse: uncertainty and horror, culminating in the narrative fulcrum of *Peaks*, *FWWM* and *Return*, the murder of Leland's own daughter Laura.

Both *FWWM* and *Return* suggest a larger role (and importance) for Laura, well beyond the wayward and wild seventeen-year-old found murdered on February 29, 1989 in *Peaks*. She is depicted as angelic in *FWWM* and an image of her, pre-conception, is sent to Earth in a gold orb by the otherworldly Senorita Dido and the Fireman. But it is in the connection between Laura and Cooper that we find perhaps *Return's* strongest criticism of nostalgia.

For all of its narrative digressions and uncertainties, its experimental uses of sound and image, *Return* can perhaps best be understood as a continuation of *Peak's* original critique of society – and particularly society's inability to deal with domestic violence and trauma. *Return* once again tears apart the foundations of modern law – and, by extension, modern society (reason, truth and justice). In their place, we are left with a collection of alternative knowledges that similarly fail.

Part of *Peaks'* rationale has always been to make visible that which remains unseen (and unspoken) in other texts, to bring to the surface what is so often buried. This process involves not only the existence of domestic violence, incest and trauma in middle class, white communities but also the difficulties in dealing with these issues (in terms of identifying the perpetrator, apportioning responsibility and reaching legal resolution). If we continue to read *Return* as metaphor then the monsters of the Black Lodge become the 'impossibility' of dealing with these crimes, the 'dual personality' of the perpetrator and, most importantly, the existence of these issues as social rather than individual problems.



Unhappy with merely solving Laura's murder and stopping the perpetrator/s (both Leland in *Peaks* and BOB in the penultimate episode of *Return*), Cooper sets out to change the timeline and actually save Laura from being killed. In this way, Cooper becomes a figure very much plagued by the malady of nostalgia. He falls back on what he knows, being the hero, trying to save Laura at any cost, even at the expense of altering time. But he fails to recognise that while he can save Laura from death, he cannot save her from the abuse she has already suffered and the damage that has already been done.

The fact that *Peaks* was originally episodic, appearing on broadcast television (ABC) and cancelled on a cliffhanger meant that the resolution of the storyline was indefinitely 'deferred' (as Derrida might say). *Return* similarly defers resolution, for there remains no easy answer to issues of domestic violence, incest and trauma. Cooper ended *Peaks* staring BOB in the face – and BOB's face is his own. In *Return* we end in just as precarious a place: Cooper completely confused ('what year is this?' he asks) and Laura Palmer/Carrie Page's terrible scream.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Professor of Slavic languages and comparative literature Svetlana Boym notes that nostalgia is 'the incurable modern condition. The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia' (Boym 2002). To some extent film franchises like *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* want to be both futuristic utopia and elegiac nostalgia. *Return* continues this trend – but like *The Force Awakens* and *Blade Runner 2049* it reframes nostalgia as malady, as something dangerous, an old cycle you cannot escape from and should avoid. This creates an interesting tension in terms of how nostalgia is represented. The industry (here represented by Showtime or Warner Brothers or Disney/Lucasfilm) trades on nostalgia to reach out to fandoms and build its audience even as the creators of these texts impliedly criticize the effects of raiding the archive, of simply falling back on what you know, into patterns, into cycles, from which you cannot ever truly escape.

## Biographical note:

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to my co-author on my 2012 *Twin Peaks* paper, Ms Elizabeth Delaney.

<sup>2</sup> This refers to a line of questioning raised by Rodley who asks Lynch whether the fact that *Peaks* 'continually plays with a confusion of outside and inside' was 'something that was on your mind'

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(Rodley, 1997: 169). Lynch responds ‘that’s sort of what life and movies are all about to me’ (qtd Rodley, 1997: 169) and while the examples given are of sets (eg. the Lodge/forest) there is no reason to think that this does not extend to character as well.

<sup>3</sup> Here it is possible to link *Peaks* to a tradition of disavowal in popular culture, where evil becomes a separate persona and therefore abrogates the protagonist’s responsibility. See Bainbridge 2009 for more detail.

<sup>4</sup> While Laura Palmer and Carrie Page look alike (they are both played by the same actress, Sheryl Lee) it is unclear if they are the same person.